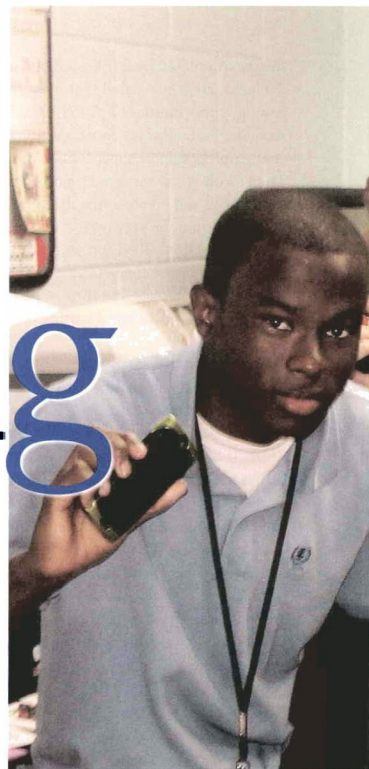


■ Susan Stone Kessler

THE Texting Principal

**Letting students send her
personal text messages makes a
principal accessible, relationships
stronger, and school safer—it just
seems crazy.**



I was appointed principal of a large, urban comprehensive high school in spring 2008. One of the first things I had to figure out was how I would develop a connection with my students when there were so many of them—nearly 2,000—and only one of me. I thought about going into each English class and listening to the students' concerns, but talking with groups of kids would not let me connect with them individually. I considered a principal advisory committee, but even if I met with 10 different kids each day, it would take me all year to have one exchange with each student, and there would still be some who would never have met me.

Like many educators, I am a parent. I noticed that communication with my son had become more of a challenge once he entered high school. Whenever I sent him a text message, however, I got a nearly immediate response, and often, we would have a text-message conversation that seemed to flow with ease. It occurred to me, if this is how teenagers communicate, then I need to communicate with them this way.

Getting the Word Out

Over the summer, I began meeting with groups of students who were at school for various activities. I met with the student council, the football

team, the band, and so forth. When I introduced myself and explained my goals for the year, I told my students I wanted to hear from them and that they would have nearly 24-hour access to me. I then asked them to take out their cell phones and add me to their contacts. Each time I did this, I could hear the disbelief grow in the crowd. Then I gave them my number.

The text messages began coming in immediately, and the word that I was sharing my personal cell phone number so that students could send me text messages spread through the school community. When school started in August, I met with each class to go over the rules, expecta-



tions, and procedures. I ended each meeting by asking students to take out their cell phones for one time only—our district policy dictates that phones are to be off and concealed during school hours—and I instructed them to add me to their list of contacts.

Topics

The topics that students send me texts about are as varied as my students are. I get questions about policies and procedures, suggestions for things students want to do, concerns about grades, and so forth. Occasionally students contact me about some very serious issues. For example,

school was out for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday when a student sent me a message about her friend being “thrown out of her house by her parents.” It was snowing that day and the friend, who was also my student, had nowhere to go. By sending messages back and forth, we were able to find alternate living arrangements for the girl before the day was over.

Students have also sent me messages to tell me that they heard rumors that a fight was planned. Such warnings help me plan better to prevent disruptions. I have also been able to get students in touch with the resources they need to obtain clothing, health care, and the like. Although I

The topics that students send me texts about are as varied as my students are. I get questions about policies and procedures, suggestions for things students want to do, concerns about grades, and so forth.

Hunters Lane High School

NASHVILLE, TN

Grades: 9–12

Enrollment: 1,900

Community: Urban

Demographics:

65% Black, 27% White, 8% Hispanic; 11.9% special education

Administrative team:

1 executive principal,
6 assistant principals

Faculty:

126 certified teachers

get an occasional complaint about a teacher, I get far more, "My teacher really helped me..." text messages from students. Many students send text messages to praise the school for the improvements we have made. The day after the first homecoming dance held in years, a student sent me a text message that said, "Thanks for letting us have a dance last night. I had a lot of fun." That made my day.

It is a challenge to feel close to students when one is a principal of a large high school, but exchanging texts with students has allowed me to begin relationships with them. Every day students come up and say, "I am the one who text messaged you about...." I always have one question for students when they say that: "Did I text you back?" They smile and respond affirmatively, knowing that they have access to me if they need me.

Anonymity

With 2,000 students sending me text messages, there is no way I can keep up with who owns which number, and I have never tried. When students text me with a personal concern, I always reply and ask them to identify themselves so that I can help them. I have never had a student refuse to identify him- or herself when I asked. Students know if they ask for help, they will get it. That trust has enabled me to refer them to resources for depression, pregnancy, homelessness, and basic necessities.

Occasionally a rumor will circulate that a fight is being planned. Students are quick to text me and let me know, particularly because they know that their messages are anonymous. Several times, students' willingness to keep me informed has

enabled me and my administrators to prevent a fight and help mediate a conflict. In addition, when students fear that they might have a conflict, it gives them an extra sense of security knowing that they can contact me at any time. One benefit of being on students' contact lists is that if a student sends a blanket text message to all of his or her contacts, I get it too. This is particularly helpful when the message deals with violating school rules.

Building Connections

When the final bell rings at the end of the school day, most students are quick to grab their cell phones and begin using them, but students who do not have a large social circle may not have anyone to send messages to. Those students know that they can send me a text, and I will always respond. This helps reduce the isolation that some kids feel. Very often the text messages are typical teenage banter, but that banter lets me get to know kids on a personal level and engage with them. And it reduces my feelings of isolation too.

Parents have been very supportive. They appreciate that their children

can get to the leader of the school at anytime. Many parents also send me text messages, and I frequently have text messages from students asking that I call their parents. Parents value the communication and the access that the text messaging provides.

My texting plan was a surprise to the teachers. I assured them that students would not get mad during class, take out their phones, and demand to send me a text message on the spot. In all the months that I have been texting students, that has not happened, not even once. When students contact me during the school day—which happens less than once a week—I do not respond until the school day is over. When I do respond, I remind them that we do not text in school. Teachers are supportive of the texting now, and they frequently send me texts too!

Time Management

Texts may be exchanged more quickly than having a conversation over the phone, exchanging e-mail messages, or holding an appointment. And even if I did not send text messages, I would still need to answer all the questions that students, teachers, and parents send to me. My text message policy is not another thing to do; it is a smarter thing to do.

Texting students has proven to be an easy way to communicate with a large student body in a personal, individual way. It enables me to give students the attention they need and deserve. PL

Susan Stone Kessler (susan.kessler@mnpa.org) is the executive principal of Hunters Lane High School in Nashville, TN. She is also an administrative faculty member at the University of Phoenix–Nashville.